

Sukhothai Historical Park

The UNESCO World Heritage Site

Story by Nirundorn
Photos by Induang



Thailand has a long history that can be traced back to the 13th century. The first kingdom of Thailand was Sukhothai, which was established by King Si Indrathit in AD 1238. Sukhothai, presently a province in the north of Thailand located 427 km from Bangkok, was a great empire whose archaeological remains can still be seen today. Although it is not as popular as Ayutthaya, the province features two world-renowned historical parks which are among the most famous historical attractions in Thailand. They are Sukhothai Historical Park and Si Satchanalai Historical Park.

Sukhothai Historical Park was designated as World Heritage Site Number 574 on 12 December 1991 by UNESCO. The ancient city of Sukhothai, along with its former vassal towns of Si Satchanalai and Kamphaeng Phet, is considered the cradle of Thai civilization.

Sukhothai Historical Park is opposite the Ramkhamhaeng National Museum, 12 km to the west of Sukhothai town on Charot Withi Thong Road, which forms a section of Highway 12 (Sukhothai-Tak Route). This historical park consists of about 30 ruins which mostly are ancient temples. The park, covering about 70 sq. km.,

is divided into five zones - central, eastern, southern, western and northern. The central zone consists of the most famous and better maintained temples. The four outer zones are less touristy than the central zone.

As the park covers a very wide area, it is more convenient to enjoy your sightseeing by bicycle. Surrounded by lakes, big trees and greenery, the park offers a pleasant bike ride to visitors. Anyway, due to the strong sunlight, you are highly recommended to wear a long-sleeved shirt and a wide-brimmed hat. There are bicycles available at many bike rental shops just outside the park itself.

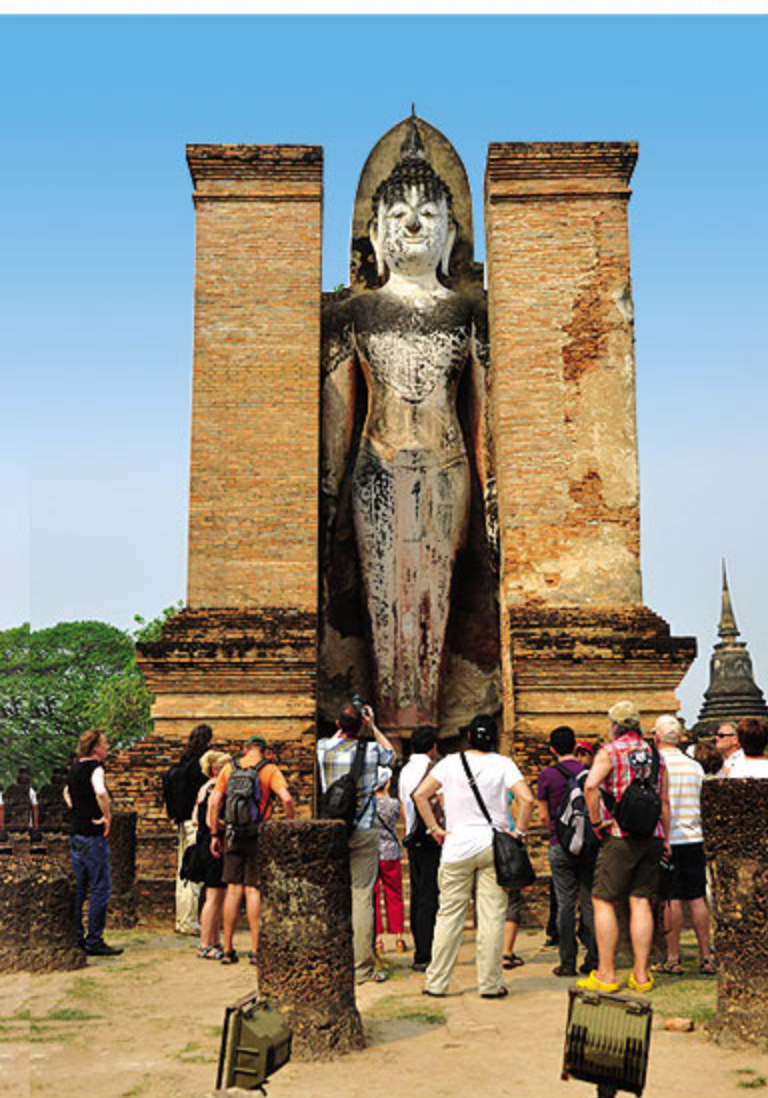
Several important monuments in the park are as follows:

The Central Zone

King Ramkhamhaeng the Great Statue

The statue is located on Charot Withithong Road to the north of Wat Mahathat. It is three-metre high and in the attitude of holding a book in his right hand with his sword lying to his left, and gazing down on his modern-day admirers, as they present their offerings of flowers and food and pray to his spirit for good fortune.





Sukhothai Ancient City Wall

The city wall has a plan of a rectangular shape with a width of 1,600 metres and a length of 1,800 metres. The inner wall was of sandstone while the outer two protective shields were moats and dykes. Besides defending against the enemies, the city wall also prevented floods.

Wat Traphang Thong

Just a short way inside the east gate of the park is Wat Traphang Thong, the "temple of the golden pond." This is the only one of the ancient temples within the old city walls that is still in active use. It was originally built around the fourteenth century. The main remaining structure is a large bell-shaped chedi. Another artifact in the temple grounds is a Buddha's footprint dating from 1359. The annual Loy Krathong festival is celebrated around this temple.

Wat Mahathat

Surrounded by a lotus pond, this temple is the largest and most impressive spot in the park. It is here King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851-1868) discovered the first stone inscription of Sukhothai*. Its main chedi (stupa), vihara (assembly hall), mandapa, uposatha (ordination hall), and approximately 200 subordinate chedis, as well as some fine Buddha images are overwhelming. These stupas represent various architectural influences. Apart from the lotus bud shape, which is the definitive style of Sukhothai, there are also chedis in the earlier styles of Hariphunchai, Lanna and Sri Lanka. Two awesome 12-metre-tall standing statues of the Buddha, Phra Attharot, are enshrined in the mandapa on both sides of the principal chedi.

Wat Chana Songkhram

The temple is to the north of Wat Mahathat and near the city pillar shrine. What to look at are its main bell-shaped chedi and the subordinate one on the eastern flank of the main chedi which is similar to the chedi of Wat Chedi Chet Thaeo in Si Satchanalai.



Noen Prasat (The Palace Mound)

It is adjacent to the east of Wat Mahathat. King Rama VI (1910-1925) proposed a theory that the mound was the remains of the palace platform. In 1983 excavation was begun by the Fine Arts Department. The elevated base was found adorned with overturned and upturned lotus mouldings. There were stairs at the front and back.

* The stone inscriptions are stones incised with stories about Sukhothai under King Ramkhamhaeng's reign. The inscriptions were written in the Thai alphabet created by the king himself. The first stone was found by King Mongkut during a country journey as an itinerant monk. More such stone inscriptions were discovered later.





Wat Traphang Ngoen

The temple's name means "temple of the silver pond." This ancient temple features an ordination hall in the middle of a small reservoir. The ordination hall is surrounded by water in accordance with the concept "Udaka Sima".

Visitors should not miss observing the main chedi which was built in the shape of a lotus bud with four niches to enshrine standing and walking Buddha images. These alcoves differentiate this chedi from other lotus bud-shaped ones.

Wat Si Sawai

Located 350 metres south of Wat Mahathat, the temple possesses three slender prangs on low base. The prangs are decorated with stucco whose patterns resemble those on Chinese wares of the Yuan Dynasty. This temple was originally a Hindu sanctuary as is evidenced by a carved lintel depicting the god Vishnu reclining on the Naga seat, fragments of Hindu images and linga found in the vicinity. It was later transformed into a Buddhist temple with some expansion of the front part in the form of a vihara.

Wat Sa Si

The temple is located to the northwest of Wat Mahathat. This ancient site is on an island in the middle of a reservoir called Traphang Trakuan. It highlights one of the most striking scenic places. The Sri Lankan bell-shaped stupas here indicate the Sinhalese influence in the Sukhothai art style.



The Northern Zone

Apart from the above temples, there are some interesting temples in the northern zone of the park. From Wat Sa Si, if you ride bicycle to the north for another 3 km, you will find the following attractive spots.

Wat Si Chum

This temple is well known for a large sitting Buddha image, Phra Achana with a 11.30-metre lap width. The image is in the subduing Mara posture. The name Achanaé, which is mentioned in Stone Inscription No.1, means one who is not frightened. Phra Achana is sheltered in a vihara whose roof has collapsed, leaving only the four walls.

Wat Phraphai Luang

Located close to the northern gate and outer city wall of Sukhothai, this ancient temple shows the evolution of Sukhothai art and architecture, ranging from the art of Khmer to Lavo. The whole cluster of construction is situated in the middle of an area enclosed within a moat 600 metres long on each side.





Tao Thuriang Earthenware Kilns

They are located in the north of the city wall, particularly around the dyke of Wat Phraphai Luang. They are divided into two types; the first one is the circular kiln and the second is in the form of a turtle shell. Most kilns discovered here are made of bricks and not the dug out kind.

These are only main attractions. There are other interesting spots worth visiting. If you do not feel so tired, you may stay there until dark to enjoy the wonderful view in different atmosphere, as the ancient monuments and ruins will be illuminated by yellow lights to create an impression on visitors.

Sangkhalok pottery

The most famous product and souvenir of Sukhothai are Sangkhalok pottery and ceramics. Sangkhalok is the glazed ceramic ware traditionally made in the kilns of Muang Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai districts in Sukhothai province. Celadon, a type of Sangkhalok stoneware, is particularly popular with foreigners, due to its high quality materials and attractive designs. The typical celadon ware usually has grey, pale blue or green, or white colour. Products range from tableware and home

decorative items to gifts and curios. If you desire to buy some items for souvenirs, you can find Sangkhalok shops lining along the road just beside the historical park.

Getting there

By bus:

Air-conditioned busses depart from Bangkok's Northern Bus Terminal (Mo Chit 2) to Sukhothai daily. The journey takes about 7 hours. Call 0 2936 2852- 66 or visit www.transport.co.th for more information.

By plane:

Bangkok Airways flies from Bangkok to Sukhothai daily, taking one hour. From the airport (40 km north of the town), there are shared mini vans to the provincial town and the historical park.

For more information, call the Bangkok Airways Reservation Center on 1771 (within Thailand) or +66 (0) 2270 6699, or visit www.bangkokair.com.

Getting around in Sukhothai

By songtaew:

Songtaews or pickup trucks with seats in the rear are the most popular mode of public transport for getting around town or between districts. Larger sized songtaews traveling to and from the city and the Sukhothai Historical Park are available at Jarot Withithong Road near Yom River.

By tuk tuk and motorbike taxi:

There are numerous tuk-tuks and motorbike-taxis available for short journeys around Sukhothai town.



By rented motorbike:

Motorbikes can be rented at many guesthouses in Sukhothai town, which will often require you to leave a photocopy of your passport. Be sure to inspect bikes prior to rental and drive with extreme caution as rental motorbikes are not normally insured. Helmets are required by Thai law. □

